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ABSTRACT

A study examined American newspaper coverage of the Harvard Medicare Project proposal of 1986, a major health policy proposal calling for comprehensive reforms in the national health program. Using Burrelle's news clipping service which includes every daily newspaper (over 1500) in the United States, all 75 newspaper articles on the project from March 11 through April 6, 1986 were examined. The content of each story was evaluated on 14 characteristics, consisting of: (1) publication date; (2) newspaper; (3) state; (4) story source; (5) headline topic; (6) mention of Harvard in the headline; (7) lead topic of the story; (8) mention of "New England Journal of Medicine"; (9) mention of Harvard medical project in the story; (10) citation of experts in the story; (11) issues discussed by the expert; (12) critical comments of proposal's impact; (13) tone; and (14) inclusion of outside critical source. Results revealed substantive and stylistic distinctions in amount of coverage, headlines, featured topics, use of experts and prestigious sources, critical commentary, and story source. Regional variations in coverage were also identified. In addition, analysis showed a lack of coverage in the daily print news media, including some of the country's largest newspapers. (Thirty-two notes are included.) (MM)

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Newspaper Coverage of the Harvard Medicare Project: Regional Distinctions/ *Discreet Disregard?*

J. Gregory Payne

An Abstract

This study examines the country's newspaper coverage of a major policy proposal - the Harvard Medicare Project of 1986 - on the twentieth anniversary of the national health program. This analysis of policy agenda-setting revealed substantive and stylistic distinctions in amount of coverage, headlines, featured topics, use of experts and prestigious sources, critical commentary, and source of story - i.e., wire service or bi-line journalist - among the diverse 1500 daily newspapers. Regional variations on these factors were identified. In addition to insights on the above variables, one unexpected and inexplanable finding was the lack of coverage of this historic study in the daily print news media, including some of the country's largest newspapers.

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Newspaper Coverage of the Harvard Medicare Project Regional Distinctions/*Discreet Disregard?*

J. Gregory Payne

> President Reagan Friday signed a bill giving 32 million Medicare beneficiaries unlimited days of hospital care and putting a cap on spending for doctor bills, declaring that the law would replace "worry and fear with peace of mind." The catastrophic coverage law is the biggest expansion of Medicare in the program's 23 year history.
>
> *Los Angeles Times*, page 1
> July 2, 1988

Modern media's proclivity towards agenda setting has long been a topic of discussion and debate among those interested in the deliberative diet offered to a public responsible for rendering decisions within our democratic system of government.[1] Studies have assiduously argued and detailed specific political campaigns and policy issues where press headlines and issues - either raised or ignored within a story - have often skewed the subsequent discussion of issues. [2] Moreover, such selective practices are frequently traced to a reporter's whim, profession or personal interest rather than the issue's relevance to the overall well being of the community.[3]

How does this gatekeeping phenomenon affect dissemination and assessment of major policy findings, in this instance the findings of a two year project on Medicare conducted by Harvard's Division of Health Policy Research and Education and the Kennedy School of Government? Succinctly stated, our interest in this paper is to explore how a major development in health policy was reported in its early stages within our nation's newspapers. What kind of information is offered to the public in the early days of impression formation of a policy, long before it is journalistically heralded into law in the manner described above by the *Los Angeles Times ?*

What did the national press report, and were there regional differences in their stories concerning this hallmark proposal on the nation's twenty-year old health care program? How extensive was the coverage of this landmark study? What was the dominant headline topic and lead topic within the story? Did newspapers tend to use the wire service as their sources of information? Were there regional differences in specificity of the information reported, and in mention of prestigious sources. More specifically did the stories mention Harvard, the site of the study or the *New England Journal of Medicine* where the findings were published? Were specific major members of the Medicare Project cited in the Medicare coverage? Were there differences in tone of the news coverage, i.e., objective - straightforward reporting of the facts; or evaluative personal criticism offered by the reporter in a given newspaper?

Such questions are pertinent and warrant investigation given the fact that the popular press, in their role as artists of the mediated reality, chiefly provide the meaning of such matters of policymaking to the general public. In his study of information and health policy, G. Kreps concludes: "Mass media have powerful influences on public health and health care due to their use as key societal channels for health information." [4] J. A. Winsten writes on the relationship between attention by the press and public awareness: "The press plays a dominant role in selecting policy issues which receive priority on the public agenda and shapes a definition of those issues for public debate and resolution."[5] There is widespread concensus on the power of the media in policymaking. In his study of the role of the press in federal policymaking, M. Linsky found that of more than 500 former government officials and policymakers interviewed, 96% identified the press as having a substantial impact on federal policy.[6] More specifically, Linsky observed a correlation between the type of press coverage and decision making: favorable news stories had a positive impact in shortening the gestation period from idea to actual policy while negative news stories prolonged the decision making process. [7]

Furthermore, a study in the *Journal of American Medical Association* reports, "The popular press reaches a broad audience of health care practitioners and consumers. Journalistic treatment of medical topics, including technology assessment results, can measurably affect health care attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors, including interactions between providers and patients."[8] Interest in the symbiotic nature of the media and medicine in their joint effort toward an informed healthier public has been a focus of numerous articles by both physicians and journalists. [9]

Winkler, Kanouse, Brodsley, and Brooks preface their study of national press coverage of health topics with the acknowledgement: "Although some dissemination channels have been examined closely, little is known about the role of one important purveyor of 'newsworthy' events - the popular press."[10] Nonetheless the authors conclude following their comprehensive analysis that "the popular press can make an important contribution to the dissemination of new medical information."[11] Winkler et al. further note an important link between press attention to a medically related topic and a specific conference, meeting or event addressing such a medical issue: "Most topics received widespread press interest that culminated around the time of each conference."[12]

This study will examine how the Harvard Medicare Project proposal was reported in American newspapers, identified in a study by Wright to be the most useful media among the public for health communication topics.[13] Of particular interest are substantive and stylistic differences previously mentioned among national newspapers in disseminating findings of the Project's report "Medicare Coming of Age: A Proposal for Reform," released on March 13, 1986.[14] Within its special section on the Harvard project, the *New England Journal of Medicine* cites the "20th anniversary of Medicare as an appropriate time to take stock of the program's successes and to make specific suggestions to meet the enormous challenges it faces."[15] In its report the Journal told

readers it had narrowed its focus to only the top 40 proposals designed to "promote cost control, fairness and simplicity in the Medicare Program."[16] A brief description of the Harvard Report on Medicare will precede our analysis of media dissemination.

The Harvard Medicare Study: A Synopsis

While praising the Medicare program "for success in promoting the health and well-being of the elderly and in easing the financial burden on their middle generation children,"[17] the two year Harvard Medicare Project called for comprehensive reforms in the nation's health program. In short, the Harvard study identified six problems inherent within the current system, and outlined the following recommendations to be undertaken over the next 10 to 15 years:

1. Administrative Simplification - Merge parts A and B of Medicare.

2. Increase Premiums, decrease copayments.

3. Catastrophic insurance.

4. Means related Financing - Ability to pay related premiums..

5. Long-Term Care Coverage.

6. Changes in Physician Payment.

Such suggestions comprised only the major points of this comprehensive review of the Medicare program. A major finding of the Harvard study was a recommendation for increased funding to meet the shortfalls of the Medicare program.[18] Within a context of

increased fiscal restraint at the federal level, the report specifically outlined how the additional long-term care provision would initially increase the federal expenditures by nearly $50 billion, with 70% of the increase offset by other governmental and private parties. [19] The report emphasized that such plans for increased expenditures would not negatively impact those served by the system;[20] the press release noted that "these reforms can be made without changing the current share of costs borne by the elderly and by taxpayers."[21] As the press release further emphasized such recommendations "are designed to make the program simpler and easier for the elderly as well as more efficient and more equitable."[22] Yet according to the Project's Report, the long range effect of such recommendations would result in substantial savings as well as an improved program: "In the year 2000 the effect of their proposals on Medicare expenditures could range from a net increase to a net decrease of approximately $3 billion in 1985 dollars."[23]

Getting the Message out: Disseminating the Findings

The public relations plan for disseminating the Medicare Project's findings to the public was composed of three distinct steps. On March 11, 1986, Former Surgeon General Dr. Julius Richmond and Dr. David Blumenthal provided a press briefing with a complete press packet to major news organizations at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. This coincided with release of the abridged version of the panel's findings in the *New England Journal of Medicine's* A Special Report: The Future of Medicare," with a March 13, 1986 cover date. The press packet included a press release, a copy of the ninety-five page monograph and the abridged version and support materials of testimonials from citizens throughout the country. Also enclosed were the proposed remarks of David Blumenthal to be delivered before the Subcommittee on Health and Long-Term Care, Select Committee on Aging, U.S. House of Representatives on March

20, 1986. Dr. Blumenthal subsequently appeared on various national news programs - INN and CNN - and ABC's "Good Morning America," outlining the findings of the Harvard Medicare Study.

METHOD

Researchers retrieved all newspaper articles on the Harvard Medicare Project topic from March 11 through April 6, 1986 from Burrelle's news clipping service which includes every daily newspaper - over 1500 - in the United States.

Content Coding Procedure

The content of each of the seventy-five stories, evaluated on fourteen characteristics of the codebook, included, 1) publication date, 2) newspaper, 3) state, 4) story source, 5) headline topic, 6) mention of Harvard in headline, 7) lead topic of story, 8) mention of *New England Journal of Medicine*, 9) mention of Harvard medical project in story, 10) citation of experts in story, 11) issues discussed by expert, 12) critical comments of proposals impact, 13) tone, and 14) inclusion of outside critical source.

Four trained coders were used in the analysis. Each coder received a group of randomly selected articles. Twelve of these articles were duplicated across coders, and produced an inter-rater reliability of 0.97. The only subjective variable was story tone. This was operationally defined as a positive or negative slant to the story that was perceived to be a bias or prejudice of the reader concerning the Medicare proposal. Inter-rater reliability of 0.90 was achieved for tone. Frequencies and cross tabulations were accomplished via SPSSX.

RESULTS

The data consisted of 75 stories published in 67 newspapers from throughout the United States. Hence, less than 5% of all the nation's daily papers included articles on the Harvard Medicare project - the first major step in health care reform effecting over 32 million Americans. With the exception of one story on April 6, 1988 seventy-four were published in March during the two week period following the March 13 press briefing in Washington. More than two of every three stories published on the project were in papers on March 13 to coincide with the *New England Journal of Medicine's* special report publication.

There were three stories appearing on March 12, in violation of the embargo required by the *New England Journal of Medicine* to protect its right for first publication of the Report, printed in bold face on the Kennedy School press release disseminated on March 11. These appeared in one major metropolitan daily, the *Chicago Tribune* , and two smaller papers - *The Enterprise*, (High Point, North Carolina) and the *News-Press*, (Santa Barbara, California). The fact that the bulk of the press coverage coincided with the actual release date of the Report and the Washington press conference is consistent with the findings of Winkler, et al. who found there to be a positive correlation in the number of related newspaper articles and the actual date of a medical conference addressing such topics.[24] Most of the coverage occurred on March 13, 1986.

The media plan's selection of Washington D.C. - where the fate of the Report's recommendations ultimately would be determined by the government - for the actual press conference was an effective rhetorical strategy in terms of attracting press coverage. In our study, the newspaper attention span focused chiefly on the press conference in Washington in which Dr. Blumenthal briefed reporters

on the Medicare project's findings. Furthermore, selection of this site as a backdrop for the press conference suggests the media planners to be cognizant of findings by both Flay and Rogers that social context influences the awareness of the public regarding health information.[25] Our data also support Winkler's finding that press coverage on the topic drastically declines as the date of the conference or report fades into history.[26]

Analysis of newspaper coverage and geographic region reveals the Medicare project to have received more coverage in the northcentral states (23 of 67 stories) and the least in the south (14 stories).[27] Both the northeast and west had 19 stories devoted to the project for their readers.

Roughly three of every four story headlines mentioned "Harvard." Further analysis of headline topics reveals the majority, or 57% of those studied, echoing an "overhaul or change in Medicare" as the primary theme of the report. One of every five stories hit at "reform" as the central idea, with costs and growth each coloring the headline tag in five stories.

Long term health care cuts was the lead story topic of approximately one out of three stories devoted to the Project. Nursing care was a lead topic in one out of four stories. Far behind in terms of lead topics was cost control, the theme of only one out of 12 stories.

The possibility of an income tax surcharge dominated coverage in only three stories, but was second only to nursing care in terms of secondary issues featured in the print coverage. Thus, the prototype story for the Medicare project was one featuring Harvard in the headline, and the story devoted to either exploring long term health care cuts or nursing care, with the possibility of an income tax surcharge as a strong secondary theme of the article.

Inherent within the coverage was recognition of credibility and expertise. Nine out of every ten stories mentioned that the project

was a Harvard University Project. More than two of every three stories contained a reference to the *New England Journal of Medicine.*

Three out of every five articles (45 in total) were identified as wire source stories (AP, UPI etc.). Over one third of all coverage was characterized by a bi-line. Comparing sources of regional coverage, the northeast and south tended to opt for bi-line journalists. Papers in the northcentral states and, even more so in the west, depended on wire services for information on the Medicare project. Data on the issue of source of coverage reveals startling regional distinctions. Over half of the stories in the northeast featured a bi-line as compared to approximately 16% in the west. Further analysis of nationwide bi-line coverage indicates that 37% originated in the Northeast papers, as compared to 11% in the papers from the West. The northcentral states and south each contributed approximately 26% of the bi-line coverage analyzed in this study. Only three of the 67 newspapers analyzed offered both the wire service and bi-line coverage for discerning readers.[28]

Furthermore, as one might expect, bi-line journalists tended to write stories judged either positive or negative rather than neutral in tone. This finding reflects the disturbing trend now evident in American journalism - moving away from merely reporting the facts toward over-interpretation and evaluation. D. Shaw writes: "Perhaps the most important change in the press corps over the past two or three decades has been its transition from being simple transcribers of others' words and deeds to acting as explicators and analysts of those words and deeds." [29]

Of the 12 stories judged negative by the coders, ten were written by bi-line reporters. And, of the 13 stories deemed positive in tone, 7 came under a bi-line. Those stories identified with a bi-line were twice more likely not to mention Harvard in their coverage as compared to wire service stories. Geographically, bi-line journalists from the northeast were the most positive in coverage tone, as contrasted to the northcentral papers which coverage was the most

negative. However, 66% or fifty articles were judged predominantly neutral in tone.

The data did reveal an interesting finding regarding overall tone of coverage and citation of one particular prestigious source. Three out of five articles lacking a reference to the *New England Journal of Medicine* were judged to be more evaluative - either having a positive or a negative tone - than coverage which mentioned the *Journal* . In contrast, no such evaluative trend was noted in coverage which either mentioned or ignored Harvard.

Expert sources were also cited in four of every five stories, with Dr. Blumenthal featured in over half the stories as the first source, Dr. Richmond was cited in one out of five stories as the principal source. Roughly two-thirds of those stories analyzed quoted an expert. One out of every five stories quoted Blumenthal, with the primary topic focusing on the burden of the low income elderly. One out of ten stories featured Blumenthal quotes on reform. Richmond was quoted less frequently without association with a dominant topic. Fourteen or approximately 19% of the stories analyzed failed to mention an expert.

Generally, 60% of the articles included critical commentary, and two-thirds of these centered on the recommendation's $50 billion cost. Less than one out of every three articles critical of the proposal mentioned any source to support their viewpoint. The most dominant source of criticism cited in eight articles was the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the newspaper coverage reveals the Harvard Medicare Project generally to have enjoyed an intense, although very brief print life in the 67 newspapers studied. The overwhelming number

of stories coincided with the release on March 13, 1986 of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.'s synopsis of the comprehensive, two year study. Articles on this major study of the nation's health care program appeared in twenty-two states, and in geographic areas serviced by papers with national circulations, i.e., *USA Today* , the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times* .

A striking revelation from this analysis is the fact that some of the nation's largest and most respected papers failed to even mention this historic report in their coverage. Among papers without stories on the Medicare project are the nation's two leading daily newspapers the *New York Daily News* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In addition, daily newspapers in Dallas, Cleveland, Miami, Houston, St. Louis, Des Moines, San Diego, Orange County (CA), Minneapolis, and Atlanta, among others, did not present the findings of the Harvard Project to their readers.

The decision by so many major papers not to include such coverage is more compelling given the fact that 98% of all U.S. cities have only one daily newspaper. [30] While many might suggest alternative news media would fill the daily print media void for the public on this topic, further study reveals that none of the three major television networks mentioned the report in their evening news as stated earlier. Only CNN and INN mentioned the Harvard study in their newscasts. Therefore, the average American citizen most probably would be unaware of this policy recommendation unless s/he was a subscriber to those national newspapers previously cited or a viewer of the channels listed above.

The tone of the articles analyzed "essentially follows a normal distribution" - two thirds judged neutral and the remainder dispersing into a negative or positive tone. Bias tended to be more prevalent in stories written by a bi-line journalist, while wire service coverage was judged to be more straightforward, or neutral in tone.

Evidence in this study suggests a possible correlation between proximity to the site of a news event and a newspaper's reporting styles. Papers in the west tended to favor the more neutral wire service coverage. Northeastern papers most commonly featured bi-line journalists who favored the project in their coverage.

The perception of Harvard as a credible institution for such work is evident in the fact that 68 (90.7%) of the stories mentioned the University as did 55 (73.3%) of the headlines studied. The *New England Journal of Medicine*, the nation's oldest and most respected medical journal, was also cited in the coverage, but to a lesser degree than Harvard. Wire service stories were more apt to include mention of such credible institutions, whereas bi-line stories did not. Those stories without any mention of the *New England Journal of Medicine* were judged more often non-neutral in tone.

On this issue of credibility, Dr. Blumenthal was the most widely quoted source. Former Surgeon General Julius Richmond was more commonly cited rather than quoted. No coverage featured citations from the Elderly and Medicare fact sheet distributed at the national press briefing.

Content analysis of the coverage reveals a common theme. Newspaper headlines generally told their readers of the need for an "overhaul change in Medicare." Yet, there was more diversity among papers on lead topics. Approximately three in ten stories emphasized long-term health care costs as a dominant theme, while three of five stories focused on the nursing coverage provision as the first or second topic item. Criticism, focused on the $50 billion cited to implement the recommendations.

CONCLUSION

This study of newspaper coverage of a major health policy proposal - the Harvard Medicare Project - highlights substantive and stylistic

distinctions in the print media's dissemination of information regarding this historical analysis of our nation's health care system. Regional variations in coverage of the report, usage of sources, identification of experts and institutions, as well as overall tone of coverage have been identified.

This study also revealed a short attention span of newspapers in their coverage of an important national policy, and the recommendations from some of America's most learned men and women in health policy. The fact that many newspapers - including some of America's largest - did not cover such an important health policy matter for their respective public's deliberation begs for explanation and further study.

Granted, television is America's major source of information, but as print journalist David Shaw writes: "the major publications (newspapers) still set the agenda - for television and indirectly, for society.[31] More importantly, newspapers provide a more defined, substantive, and reflective assessment of the issues necessary for policymaking than its more popular counterpart - television and its news hybrid - infotainment. In his early work on agenda setting, McCombs wrote: "This basic, primitive notion of agenda setting is a truism. If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agenda or in our life space."[32] This study highlights a disturbing void of coverage for a major comprehensive report that initiated the most dramatic changes in our nation's health care system two years after its release. Politics and policymaking can only benefit from further investigation of such events and increased discussion among an educated public, informed enough to render rational judgments within the democratic process.

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[2] *Ibid.* Also see Williams W. Jr. and Larsen DC, "Agenda setting in an off-election Year."*Journalism Quarterly,* 1977; 54, 744-749; Swanson LL And Swanson DL, "The Aaenda setting function of the first ford-carter debate," *Communication Monographs,* 1978; 45, 347-353; William WJ. and Semlak WD. "Structural effects of tv coverage on political agendas," In Gerbner G (ed), *Journal of Communication,* 28 (4), 114-119, 1978; Neustadt R. *Presidential Power; The Politics of Leadership,* New York: John Wiley, 1980; Weaver DH, Graber DA and McCombs ME and Eyal CH, *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election,* New York: Praeger, 1981; Blumer JG and Gurevitch M, "Politicians and the press: an essay on role relationships," in Nimmo DD and Sanders KR (eds) *Handbook of Political Communication,* Newbury Park: Sage, 467-493, 1981; Winter JP and Eyal CH, "Agenda setting for the civil rights issue," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* 45, 1981, 376-383; Procario MO, "The press and chappaquiddick in the 1980 presidential campaign: The development of a voting issue," unpublished Masters thesis, Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1982; Williams Jr. W, Shapirio M and Cutbirth C. "Campaign '76: Aaenda setting during the new hampshire primary," *Journal of Broadcasting,* 22, 531-540, 1983; Artherton FC, *Media Politics: The News Strategies of Presidential Campaigns,* Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1984; Iyengar S. & Kinder DR, "More than meets the eye: television news, priming, and Ppresidential evaluations." In G. Comstock (ed), *Public Communication and Behavior,* vol 1, New York: Academic Press, 1986; Payne JG, " Shaping the race issue: a special kind of journalism," *Political Communication and Persuasion,* 1988, 5,3,(in press).

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12 *Ibid.*

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16 *Ibid.*

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20 *Ibid.*

21 Harvard Press release, p. 4.

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23 *Ibid.*

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[26] Winkler, "Popular Press Coverage of Health Topics."

[27] The newspapers studied separated into the following groupings for 22 states:
(#) = number of articles coded in that state
Northeast: Massachusetts (9), New York (5), New Jersey (2), Washington D.C. (2) Rhode Island (1) .
North Central: Illinois (9), Pennsylvania (6), Indiana (5), Michigan (1), Ohio (1), Wisconsin (1)
South: North Carolina (10), Louisiana (2), Florida (1), and Texas (1).
West: California (10), Colorado (3), Washington (2), Montana (1), Kansas (1), Oregon (1), and Utah (1).

[28] These papers included the *Boston Globe, New Orleans Times Picayune & Rock Island (IL) Argus.*

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